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Translatability and Untranslatability (A Historical Background)

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Abstract

This study, Translatability and Untranslatability (A Historical Background), explores the enduring debate between translatability and untranslatability as central, opposing forces in translation studies. Tracing the evolution of this discourse from antiquity to the contemporary period, the research investigates how different philosophical, linguistic, and functional approaches have shaped our understanding of what it means to translate. The historical overview begins with the Ancient and Classical periods, examining early reflections on translation in Biblical, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman contexts. It then considers the Medieval and Early Modern eras, highlighting how translation during the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Romanticism fostered the emergence of seminal ideas articulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The 20th-century debates are analyzed through three major frameworks: the formalist, the philosophical, and the functionalist approaches.

The philosophical tradition, represented by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Antoine Berman, Lawrence Venuti, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Gayatri Spivak, Barbara Cassin, and Emily Apter, foregrounds the limits of translatability and the ethical and ontological dimensions of translation. These theorists argue that translation inevitably involves loss, transformation, and difference, revealing the unbridgeable gaps between languages and cultures. In contrast, the functionalist school—including Eugene Nida, Katharina Reiss, Juliane House, Hans Vermeer, Christiane Nord, Mona Baker, and Gideon Toury—advances the principle of translatability by focusing on communicative purpose, textual function, and cultural adaptability. Together, these contrasting perspectives illuminate the dynamic tension between the impossibility and necessity of translation. The study concludes that translation, situated between fidelity and creativity, remains not merely a linguistic act but a profound cultural and philosophical negotiation between worlds.

Keywords: translatability, untranslatability, translatable, untranslatable, translation, translation studies

1. Introduction

The concepts of 'translatable' and 'untranslatable' have been central to translation theory since its earliest days. They have been widely examined in translation studies, linguistics, and philosophy. Each concept presents unique perspectives, reflecting ongoing debates about the possibilities and limitations of conveying meaning across languages and cultures.

The idea of the translatable is based on the belief that human thought, experience, and the fundamental structure of reality are universal. This view suggests that although languages may differ in their surface features (words and grammar), the concepts, ideas, and intentions they communicate are familiar to everyone. In contrast, the notion of the untranslatable challenges the universalist perspective, arguing that language is not merely a container for pre-existing ideas but an active force that shapes reality and cognition. This view asserts that some aspects of a language are so deeply rooted in its specific culture, history, and structure that they resist complete transfer.

Throughout history, the issues of translatability and untranslatability have been central to debates in translation studies and the philosophy of language. Some theorists have explicitly addressed this question, while others have focused on practical or methodological aspects of translation without exploring the ontological or philosophical nature of translatability in depth. The philosophical and practical questions of translatability and untranslatability

have ancient origins, with early discussions emerging in religious, literary, and intellectual contexts across civilisations.

2. Ancient and Classical Periods (Pre-5th Century CE)

2.1 Biblical and Mesopotamian Debates (3rd Millennium BC)

The earliest and most enduring allegory of untranslatability and the chaos of linguistic difference is found in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). This allegory serves as the foundational text for the idea that multilingualism is a divine curse and a barrier to human unity, since humanity once spoke a single, universal language. In their quest to establish their own greatness and unity (and to prevent their dispersion across the earth), humans attempted to build a city and a massive tower (the Tower of Babel) "with its top in the heavens."

In response to this prideful ambition, God chose not to destroy the structure physically but to dismantle the universal language itself. He scattered the people by confounding their speech, thereby introducing the chaos of linguistic diversity. This multilingualism was seen as a divine curse (God's act of creating different tongues (polyglotism) was a direct punishment meant to disrupt and fragment human cooperation). Likewise, language differences were regarded as barriers (by instantly creating separate languages, God made it impossible for people to understand one another).

This new linguistic reality became the main obstacle to human unity, effectively halting the construction of the tower and leading to the people's dispersal. Consequently, untranslatability was seen as a form of punishment. The immediate result was a state of pure untranslatability: a confusion of language where meaning could not be easily transferred. The need for translation stemmed from a divine penalty, marking languages not just as tools for communication but as a "sort of punishment" that keeps humanity divided and constantly struggling to bridge semantic gaps.

2.2 Greek and Roman Thought (5th Century BC –4th Century AD)

Aristotle contends that although words differ across languages, concepts (for example, "justice" and "freedom") are universal, suggesting they can be translated. He established the philosophical basis for believing in the translatability of meaning by distinguishing the sign from the thing signified. He maintained that while words—spoken sounds and written symbols—are arbitrary and therefore language-specific, the underlying concepts or feelings of the soul (such as "justice," "freedom," or "virtue") are universal.

This universality implies that all concepts are fundamentally transferable. Since the idea of freedom holds the same meaning for a Greek speaker as it does for a German speaker, an accurate translation requires finding the appropriate new sign (word) for that universal concept. Aristotle's perspective suggests that perfect equivalence of meaning is theoretically possible in principle.

In his treatise De Optimo Genere Oratorum (“On the Best Kind of Orator”), the Roman statesman and orator Cicero (106–43 BCE) established a lasting dichotomy in translation theory by strongly promoting sense-for-sense translation rather than literal, word-for-word translation. His approach was not based on abstract philosophy but on the practical need to convey the power and rhetorical brilliance of Greek oratory into Latin.

Cicero's method fundamentally recognized the reality of linguistic gaps. By rejecting a rigid, word-for-word approach (“interpretari”), he understood that the grammatical structures, idioms, and specialized vocabulary of Greek did not have simple, exact equivalents in Latin. A literal translation, he realized, would produce a text that was awkward, opaque, and lacking the stylistic force needed to move a Roman audience. Instead, he chose to translate "not as an interpreter, but as an orator" (non verbum pro verbo), emphasizing the importance of conveying the idea and rhetorical effect of the source text.

Ironically, by promoting the highly adaptive sense-for-sense method, Cicero implicitly acknowledged the limits of translatability. The very need to alter the source text (restructuring sentences, substituting concepts, and finding new idioms) demonstrated that the original's unique artistic and aesthetic qualities could not be transferred intact.

To achieve a comparable impact on the audience, the translator must focus on adaptation and interpretation rather than merely on language transfer. This realization (that perfect, unaltered equivalence is unattainable across profound linguistic and cultural gaps) raised a fundamental issue in translation studies that remains a topic of debate today. Cicero essentially outlined the translator's ethical dilemma: fidelity to the words sacrifices meaning, while fidelity to the meaning sacrifices the words, (Robinson, Douglas., 1997) thereby admitting, consequently, the untranslatability of the text.

3. Medieval Period (5th–14th Century)

Islamic scholars (e.g., Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Idris ash-Shâfi'î) declared that Arabic is the only valid language for the Qur'an, allowing translations only as tafsir (interpretation) of the Qur'an, (Abdel Haleem, M. A. S., 2004) which has been regarded ever since as scientifically and linguistically unique, miraculous, and therefore untranslatable. Islamic scholars' defence of the untranslatability of the Qur'an aimed to protect God's words from alteration, distortion, misrepresentation, and textual change. Following the same approach, Arab classical literary scholars argued for the untranslatability of Arabic classical poetry, but for a different reason.

They defended its untranslatability to support the parallel claims that Arabic is the mother of all languages, the language of God, and the language of the Day of Resurrection, (al-Jāḥiẓ., 1960) on one hand; and to uphold the supremacy of the Arabic language over other tongues, particularly in poetry, which is often regarded among Arabs as their highest literary genre (Diwan Al Arab) and the primary expressive tool in which they believe nobody worldwide can compete or prevail against them. Amrû Al-Jahiz, a renowned scholar of his era, argued that the untranslatability of classical Arabic poetry was such that it was a great honor for world literature to be translated into Arabic, not the reverse. (Ibid., pp. 75-77.) These claims did not sit well with the Europeans, who largely neglected translating Arabic classical poetry into Latin during the Medieval Age, focusing instead on translating Arabic science, philosophy, and magic.

4. European Renaissance (15th–16th Century)

Martin Luther's groundbreaking German Bible translation, completed in 1534, ignited profound intellectual discussions and sparked theological debates across Europe that centered on the very nature of divine meaning and its ability to withstand translation: could meaning survive the process? (Berger, Peter L., 2017) Before Luther, the Latin Vulgate and the belief in the sacred, singular authority of the original Hebrew and Greek texts dominated Christian thought. Luther's project, by rendering Scripture into the vernacular German of the ordinary people, radically decentralized religious authority.

This act immediately raised the urgent question: Could the holy, divinely inspired meaning inherent in the original languages genuinely survive when translated into a human language like German? This discussion extended beyond mere linguistics. It considered whether a translation, which is necessarily an interpretation, could preserve the absolute and untainted truth of God's word, thereby fundamentally changing the relationship between the believer, the scripture, and the ecclesiastical authority that had previously guarded the Latin text.

5. Enlightenment and Romanticism (18th–19th Century)

In the 19th century, three pivotal German figures significantly influenced translation theory by emphasising the connections between language, culture, and the ethics of the translator: Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

5.1 Friedrich Schleiermacher's Contribution

In his influential 1813 essay, "On the Different Methods of Translating," the theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher shifted the focus from the inherent limits of language to the ethical decisions a translator faces in relation to the target audience, drawing a vital distinction between two main translation strategies: domestication and foreignization. The former, domestication, seeks to bring the author closer to the reader by making the translated text familiar, fluent, and easily accessible to the target-language audience, employing local idioms, cultural references, and syntax to make the text seem as if it were originally written in the target language.

The latter, foreignization, seeks to bring the reader closer to the author while maintaining the original text's unfamiliarity and cultural distance. The translator intentionally preserves elements of the source language's structure, vocabulary, and cultural markers, encouraging the reader to experience the text as an alien entity. The aim is to enrich the target culture by introducing new ideas and styles, rather than merely copying what is familiar.

Ultimately, Schleiermacher favoured foreignization, emphasising that accurate understanding arises from engaging with the original context. He prefers it over domestication for serious philosophical and literary works, believing it is the only way to convey the original author's culture and thought authentically. This distinction remains central to translation studies today, particularly through the work of theorist Lawrence Venuti, who employs these concepts to critique the homogenising influence of domestically focused translations. (Venuti, Lawrence., 2004)

Schleiermacher acknowledged that perfect translation is unattainable because of inherent linguistic and cultural differences. However, he believed that conveying the author's original intent is vital. (Schleiermacher, Friedrich., 1992) Schleiermacher and, later, Antoine Berman emphasized the distinction and the impossibility of fully

capturing foreignness.

5.2 Wilhelm von Humboldt's Contribution

In his 1836 work On Language, Wilhelm von Humboldt advanced a compelling linguistic philosophy that strengthened the case for relative untranslatability. He introduced the concept of "worldview" (Weltanschauung), asserting that language is not just a tool for naming pre-existing concepts. Instead, it is an active force that influences its speakers' thoughts and shapes their perception of reality, and thereby becomes the embodiment of a nation's worldview. This is why each language reflects a unique way of perceiving and organizing reality.

Given that different languages impose distinct conceptual frameworks, cognitive limits, and cultural priorities on their speakers, language assumes a new role as a filter. That is why Humboldt believed that translation is feasible but always involves transformation, as it requires adapting the original ideas to a different linguistic and cultural context. While he recognized the difficulties of translation, he did not consider it impossible. He argued that it is a meaningful endeavor, valued for cultural exchange, but, like Goethe, he acknowledged its limitations.

Because language forms a complex web woven from history, culture, and unique conceptual categories, no two languages can ever perfectly align. Translation is therefore not just a simple substitution, but a complex and creative act that involves bridging two distinct worldviews. This impossibility of achieving perfect equivalence illustrates the concept of relative untranslatability (meaning that while a translator can convey the general sense, the complete, nuanced, and culturally embedded meaning of the original is always subtly altered). (Humboldt, Wilhelm von., 1988)

5.3 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Contribution

Another prominent German figure is often mentioned alongside the previous two romantics: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who influenced later thinking on translation by framing it as a key driver of "World Literature" (Weltliteratur) and by formally theorising its developing practice.

"I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men... National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach." (Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von., 1827)

Goethe's theory of translation is closely linked to his concept of Weltliteratur (i.e., "World Literature"). He believed that the movement of texts across borders, primarily through translation, would foster genuine cultural exchange, enabling each nation to appreciate the unique philosophical and aesthetic achievements of others. The challenge of untranslatability (which is the very attempt to capture the foreign spirit) is what gives this exchange its significance.

"It is pleasant to see that intercourse is now so close between the French, English, and Germans that we shall be able to correct one another. This is the greatest use of World Literature, which will show itself more and more." (Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von., 1827)

While Goethe championed translation as a means of cultural exchange, he also recognized the inherent limitations and the ongoing challenge of untranslatability at each stage. This theme recurs in his theoretical discussions, especially concerning the need for a "third type" of translation that aims to make the foreign text feel foreign to the reader, often at the expense of fluency in the target language.

Goethe's most systematic reflections on translation are found in the notes and essays accompanying his collection of poems, West-Eastern Diwan, published in 1819. He proposed three distinct, ascending stages or types of translation to address untranslatability, each implicitly dealing with how to handle the "foreignness" or the untranslatable elements of the source text: direct or literal translation (i.e., the foreignness itself), paraphrastic or domesticating translation (i.e., assimilation), and the assimilation of the foreign as one's own (i.e., Perfect Identity).

The first stage of translation, known as direct or literal translation, concentrates on the form and structure of the original. The translator closely follows the syntax and vocabulary of the source language, aiming to reproduce the source text's rhythm and structure in the target language. This stage emphasizes the untranslatable elements. It can make the translation seem awkward or unidiomatic in the target language because it preserves the foreign flavor, compelling the reader to recognize the linguistic difference. The reader is drawn into "the foreign sphere." (Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von., 1994)

The second stage, paraphrastic or domestication translation, is a response to the rigidity of the first. Here, the translator strives for fluency and ease in the target language. The foreign elements are smoothed out, and the

content is rendered in a way that is immediately understandable and appealing to the target audience. This stage hides the untranslatable. It prioritizes meaning (or what the translator perceives the meaning to be) over form and effectively domesticates the original. This is the stage later theorists like Lawrence Venuti would critique as "domestication." (Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von.)

The third and highest stage, assimilation of the foreign as one's own, is where translation goes beyond mere transference. In this stage, the translation attains a kind of "perfect identity" in which the text is completely rendered in the target language while simultaneously conveying the unique spirit (Geist) and conceptual force of the original. It requires the translator to adopt the source culture's perspective and "make the work as the foreign author would have made it, had he written in our own language." This stage surpasses the untranslatable, not by ignoring it, but by absorbing its essence into a newly created work. The foreign text is reborn in a way that preserves its "untranslatable" spirit while fully integrating it into the target language's literary potential.

In short, the three stages of translation, following Goethe, progress from the prosaic stage, where the reader encounters the foreign work most simply. (Similar to Luther King's Bible translation), to the parodistic or adaptive stage, where the translator tries to substitute the foreign culture's content with familiar terms from their own culture, ending with the identical or interlinear stage (i.e., the "third type"), which is most admired for making it similar to the original while still feeling foreign or "unnatural" in the target language. This stage recognizes and respects the "inherent limitations and the struggle with untranslatability."

6. 20th-Century Debates

The 20th-century theorists addressed issues of translatability and untranslatability in meaningful and often foundational ways. However, the manner and purpose of their engagement with the topic varied according to their disciplinary focus (philosophy, linguistics, literature, cultural theory) and theoretical orientation. They discussed translatability and untranslatability explicitly (e.g., Benjamin, Derrida, Cassin), implicitly (e.g., Goethe, Humboldt), or contextually (e.g., Jakobson, Spivak, House). Consequently, their approaches differed considerably.

6.1 The Structuralist Approach: Roman Jakobson's Contribution

In his seminal 1959 essay, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Roman Jakobson presented a pragmatic and systematic framework for understanding how meaning is conveyed, not only across different languages but also within the same language and across various sign systems entirely. He categorized translatability into three distinct types. The first is intralingual translation (or rewording). It is a translation within the same language. This entails interpreting verbal signs by using other signs in the same language (i.e., paraphrasing a complex poem, summarizing a legal document, or clarifying an old term with a modern synonym).

The second type is interlingual translation (or proper translation). It involves translating between two languages, such as interpreting verbal signs in another language (e.g., translating a French sentence into English). The third is intersemiotic translation (or transmutation), which involves translating between different sign systems. This could include interpreting verbal signs through non-verbal systems, such as adapting a novel into a film by translating spoken or written language into visual signs.

Roman Jakobson, in the essay above, acknowledged that poetry and metaphoric language often resist translation, especially in the case of sound-meaning relations: "Poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible." (Jakobson, Roman., 1959)

Jakobson's model is crucial because it expands the concept of translatability beyond the traditional language-to-language exchange, demonstrating that all communication is essentially a form of interpretation or recoding. While he acknowledges that differences between language systems (interlingual translation) require "creative transposition," his model shows that seeking equivalent meaning is a pervasive human activity, whether we are paraphrasing a concept (intralingual) or adapting a story to a new medium (intersemiotic). (Ibid., pp. 232-239.)

6.2 The Philosophical Approach

What characterized academia in the 20th century was the dominant tendency towards philosophical approaches. Antoine Berman, in his The Experience of the Foreign (1984), emphasizes the "trial of the foreign" and the ethical tension in translation. Gayatri Spivak, in The Politics of Translation (1992), highlights cultural and gender-specific untranslatability. Jacques Derrida, in his Des Tours de Babel (1985), believes that language is inherently unstable and that complete translation is impossible. Lawrence Venuti, in his The Translator's Invisibility (1995), focuses on domestication versus foreignization; he criticizes fluency as erasure of difference. Barbara Cassin, editor of Dictionary of Untranslatables (2004), focuses on philosophical terms that resist translation, emphasizing how

certain words "resist" assimilation into other languages. Umberto Eco, in his Mouse or Rat, champions negotiation...

6.2.1 Walter Benjamin's Contribution

In 1923, Walter Benjamin translated Charles Baudelaire's Tableaux Parisiens into German, prefacing it with an article that would establish Benjamin's distinctive, even mystical, theory of translation: "The Task of the Translator." This dense yet foundational essay on the philosophy of translation defines the translator's role not as making the original text accessible or familiar, but as echoing its intended mode and faithfully representing how meaning is conveyed in the original, rather than rendering merely its literal content.

In this well-known preface, Benjamin dismisses the idea that translation's purpose is to communicate the meaning of the original text to new readers. Translation is not simply a matter of linguistic substitution or message transfer. It does not replace, reproduce, or replicate the original. Instead, it prolongs its life by becoming part of its "afterlife" (Nachleben). The act of translating contributes to the ongoing history and evolution of the original text: "A translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife." (Benjamin, Walter., 1968)

Benjamin claims that a literary work has an "afterlife" or "survival" (Überleben), which is separate from its immediate life at the time of creation. Translation serves as the formal means by which this afterlife is prolonged, allowing the translator to bring the work closer to the ideal of Pure Language (Reine Sprache) by highlighting its potential beyond its original form. The concept of Pure Language, which Benjamin described as the harmonious essence of all languages, was introduced to demonstrate that all languages point toward a hidden, higher, pure language (a state of ultimate linguistic unity in which all meaning is fully realized).

Since no single existing language is this Pure Language, the original text remains inherently incomplete, longing for the interplay between the original and the translation to reveal it. Accordingly, translation is never complete; perfect translatability is unattainable, but the act of translating allows the original to attain a form of afterlife, enriching both the source and target languages. Benjamin saw translation as a means to access a deeper linguistic truth, despite its limitations.

Thus, to complete the task, the purpose of translation is not to enhance the reader's understanding or to precisely reproduce the source text, but to serve the original work itself, ensuring its continued existence in a new linguistic and cultural context: (Pym, Anthony., 2020)

"A translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life." (Benjamin, Op. Cit., p. 71.)

This view implicitly confirms that meaning is never entirely transferable in the conventional sense, as the original meaning is itself only a partial expression of the overall linguistic truth. The value of translation does not lie in preserving the original content but in revealing its destiny and the kinship between the two languages. (Ibid., pp. 69-82.)

He envisions all translations as fragments that contribute to the discovery of a "pure language," a kind of ideal linguistic unity that transcends individual languages. Translation thus serves a metaphysical purpose: harmonizing different languages and uncovering this profound truth of language. In this context, he wrote, "All translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages to each other." (Ibid., p. 75.) That is, from Benjamin's perspective, translation is not about conveying information but about revealing this Pure Language through the interaction of the original and the translation: "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original." (Ibid., p. 70.)

Benjamin understands translatability differently. For him, whether a work is translatable depends not on external influences but on its intrinsic value and inherent nature. A great work contains something "translatable" because of its inner meaning and form: "The question of translatability is not whether a work can be translated at all, but rather whether it is in its nature translatable." (Ibid., p. 70.) He argued that translatability is an innate characteristic of the original work. If a text has intrinsic worth or spiritual significance, it will invite translation, even if not immediately achievable; it will eventually find its suitable translator because texts are not reliant on external linguistic factors.

Similarly, a text is not untranslatable simply because it has not yet been successfully translated or has not been translated at all. The real question is whether there is anything in it worth translating. If there is, then despite its current untranslatability, it will be translatable at some point in the future: "It is not that a particular work is untranslatable, but that a particular stage of its continued life is not yet ripe for translation." (Ibid., p. 72.)

Overall, Walter Benjamin viewed translation not as a replication of meaning but as a revelation of Pure Language (a metaphysical essence beyond both the source and target languages). Benjamin regards translation as a creative and philosophical act that uncovers the intrinsic translatability and value of the original, extends its afterlife, and participates in the development of pure language. It should focus on fidelity to form and intention rather than mere accuracy of meaning. In simple terms, Benjamin's concept of the translator's task is to make all texts intelligible to target-language readers.

6.2.2 Antoine Berman's Contribution

Antoine Berman's work, particularly L'Épreuve de l'étranger: Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique (1984), translated as The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany, fundamentally approaches translation as an ethical and aesthetic encounter. He focuses not on what translation is, but on how it is typically performed and the damage it can inflict on the source text's "foreignness." (Berman, Antoine., 1992)

Berman argues that the main ethical aim of translation should be to preserve the "foreignness" or alterity (l'étrangeté) of the source text. He views the attempt to completely erase this foreign texture as a narcissistic desire to assimilate the other into one's own culture. For Berman, this resistance to total translatability is where the actual value of the foreign text resides. (Ibid., p. 4.)

Berman's most practical and famous contribution is his identification of twelve "deforming tendencies" that characterize translation aimed at domestication—the very attempt to eliminate the untranslatable elements. These tendencies are implicit meditations on how an original's unique form, meaning, and spirit (its untranslatable residue) can be systematically compromised when a translator prioritizes fluency and clarity in the target language. These tendencies include rationalization (reorganizing syntax for clarity), clarification (explicitly stating what is implicit), expansion (inflating the text), ennoblement/popularization (rewriting style to fit perceived literary taste), and destruction of rhythms (breaking the original cadence). (Ibid., pp. 53-75.)

6.2.3 Lawrence Venuti's Contribution

Lawrence Venuti built upon Berman's ethical concerns, focusing his critique specifically on the Anglophone tradition of translation. In his influential work, The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation (1995), Venuti contends that the prevailing demand for "fluency" in English-language translation has rendered both the translator and the source culture invisible, thereby enforcing a cultural hegemony.

He critiques the dominant practice of domestication, where a text is translated into a fluent, "natural-sounding" version in the target language. He argues that this practice erases the linguistic and cultural alterity of the source text, implicitly rendering the "foreign" translatable into familiar terms. He sees this as an imperialistic gesture that makes foreign culture palatable and consumable. To counter this, Venuti champions "foreignization." This strategy deliberately seeks to preserve the "untranslatable residues" of the original text by allowing the translator to leave traces of the source language's structure, vocabulary, and cultural context. (Venuti, Lawrence., 1995)

Venuti's key concept, "the translator's invisibility," is the effect of domestication. The translator becomes invisible when their work reads so fluently that it appears to have been initially written in the target language. Venuti posits that resisting this total translatability (through foreignization) is an ethical act because it forces the target reader to acknowledge the text's foreignness and the translator's presence, disrupting the illusion of unmediated communication. (Ibid. pp. 1-31)

6.2.4 Jacques Derrida's Contribution

Taking a deeper dive into poststructuralist views on translatability, Jacques Derrida's perspective emerges as the most notable one. Derrida's view challenges traditional notions of equivalence and the transfer of meaning in translation. Derrida questioned absolute translatability, suggesting that meaning is always deferred (différance). For him, translation involves transformation rather than equivalence, (Derrida, Jacques., 1985) arguing that all translation is haunted by untranslatability because meaning is never fully stable: "We only ever speak one language—and, since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other". (Derrida, Jacques., 1996)

Derrida critiques the classical idea that translation involves a stable transfer of meaning from one language to another because meaning is never fully present. It is always deferred (différance). (Derrida.) This means that words do not have fixed, inherent meanings, but rather gain significance through differences and context, and that translation is not about finding an equivalent. It is about recreating meaning in a new linguistic system, which inherently changes it: "The translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself." (Ibid., p. 188.)

Derrida approached translation through the lens of deconstruction, focusing on the inherent instability of meaning in language. He argued that complete translation is impossible because words carry meanings that are context-dependent and often untranslatable. In his analysis of the Tower of Babel myth, Derrida highlighted the paradox of translation: the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of fully capturing meaning across languages. Derrida, however, emphasised the inherent untranslatability of language due to its complex and unstable nature.

Derrida wrote: "The 'Tower of Babel' does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalising." (Ibid., p. 170.) He uses the biblical story of Babel (Genesis 11) as a metaphor: God's destruction of the single language introduces necessary but impossible translation. Humans must translate, yet perfect translation is unattainable. This tension highlights the "Babelian" Dilemma and defines translation as both obligatory and doomed to incompleteness.

Derrida challenges the notion of "pure" translatability, arguing that language is inherently impure and haunted by untranslatability. (Derrida.) He discusses how translation both demands and defies perfect equivalence, highlighting the inherent untranslatability of specific terms (e.g., différance). (Derrida.) Jacques Derrida goes further, arguing that the meaning of a word, before proceeding with its translation, is already unstable, and that translating it will always be a reinvention, not a replication. (Ibid., p. 174.)

This led Derrida to introduce the idea of "relevant" translation (la traduction relevante) as opposed to "perfect" translation. A relevant translation must choose between possible meanings, inevitably losing some aspects. The "best" translation, for Derrida, is one that acknowledges its own incompleteness rather than striving for illusory equivalence. The French "Être ou ne pas être" is not equivalent to Shakespeare's "To be or not to be". Instead, it is a reinterpretation of the famous Shakespearean expression, shaped by French grammar and philosophy. (Derrida, Jacques., 2001)

6.2.5 Umberto Eco's Contribution

Eco believes that "the problem of translation is not merely linguistic; it is cultural, because signifiers in different languages refer to different systems of knowledge." (Eco, Umberto., 2003) "Bread", for example, can evoke different cultural associations, making perfect equivalence illusory and unattainable. (Ibid., p. 9.) Bread, in Arabic for instance, may refer to "life" and "sustenance", "living", "Social bond", "Blessing", "Livelihood", "Hospitality", and "food". In French, bread may refer to various bread shapes, such as "baguette", "Pain de campagne", "Pain complet", "Pain aux céréales", "Pain de mie", "Pain viennois", "Pain brioche", and "Ficelle", among others.

Umberto Eco argues that languages worldwide may use the same signifier but may not necessarily refer to the same signified, making translations from one language to another a constant source of cultural friction:

"Saying almost the same thing is all that we can hope for. Every language maps the world differently; the translator must negotiate between signifiers and signifieds that do not overlap perfectly." (Ibid. pp. 2-3.)

Eco's semiotic position is that signifiers (words) are arbitrary but not universal, that signifieds (meanings and concepts) vary across languages and cultures. That translation is always negotiation, not mere equivalence, leading to "cultural friction."

6.2.6 Gayatri Spivak's Contribution

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak places significant emphasis on the concept of untranslatability, particularly in her essay "The Politics of Translation." She contends that translation is never a neutral or mechanical act of linguistic substitution but rather an intensely political process that requires negotiating cultural difference, gendered subjectivity, and relations of power: "Translation is the most intimate act of reading… I surrender to the text when I translate." (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak., 1993) For Spivak, language carries the histories, hierarchies, and ideologies of its speakers, making any attempt at equivalence inherently problematic: "It is not bodies of meaning that are transferred in translation…" (Ibid. p. 180.) She warns that striving for linguistic or semantic equivalence often leads to the erasure of the other, as translation can domesticate or assimilate marginalized voices into the dominant discourse. Spivak is opposed to "transparency" in translation, which often serves the interests of imperialism. (Ibid., p. 179.) She advocates for "surrender to the text", where the translator acknowledges untranslatable gaps. (Ibid. p. 183.)

In postcolonial contexts, this becomes especially fraught. Spivak argues that the voice of the subaltern (the socially, politically, and economically oppressed subject) resists complete translation because it emerges from a position of structural marginality. Translating the subaltern's words into the language of global power (often English or another colonial language) risks reproducing the same asymmetries that silenced them in the first place: "The task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency."

(Ibid., p. 179.) The translator, therefore, must remain acutely aware of these ideological and linguistic asymmetries, recognizing that translation can either reinforce or challenge existing power structures. Spivak ultimately calls for a "responsible" or "ethical" translation (one that attends carefully to the texture, rhythms, and social location of the original text, allowing the foreignness of the other to be felt rather than erased). (Ibid., p. 180.)

6.2.7 Barbara Cassin's Contribution

20th-century thinkers concentrated directly on what is (un)translatable and why, often engaging with meaning, cultural differences, or linguistic limits. In this context, Barbara Cassin, in her Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon (2014), fundamentally redefines our understanding of translation and philosophy itself. As the director of the project and main editor, she maintains that untranslatables (or intraduisibles in the original French) are not signs of linguistic failure or impossibility, but rather indicators and sites of philosophical tension and productivity across languages. She argues that the untranslatable is not something that cannot be translated, but rather something that we never cease translating, or that requires a detailed, argumentative paraphrase to convey its meaning. These terms, she claims, reveal the unique thinking structure or conceptual architecture embedded within a specific language or philosophical tradition.

Cassin and her collaborators examine how certain philosophical terms become so deeply embedded in the grammar, history, and conceptual frameworks of their original language that translating a single word into another language inevitably loses important semantic or historical nuances. This requires a lexicon that captures the differences between languages, illustrating how European philosophical thought developed not despite linguistic boundaries but through them.

An example of an untranslatable term is the Greek Logos, which clearly demonstrates the challenge of untranslatability. In ancient Greek, logos covers a broad and intricate semantic field that a single English or French word cannot fully capture. It can mean "speech," "word," "reason," "account," "argument," "proportion," "discourse," "definition," or "principle," depending on the context. In the well-known Biblical opening "In the beginning was the Logos," the translator faces the choice between "Word" and "Reason." However, in doing so, their translation will lose the semantic tension inherent in the original Greek that connects all those meanings.

Barbara Cassin views untranslatables not as obstacles but as opportunities for deeper engagement with language. She argues that untranslatables are "what one does not stop (not) translating," emphasising the ongoing process of interpretation and the dynamic nature of meaning, and revealing the epistemological differences between cultures. (Ibid., Introduction, p. xvii.) The Dictionary, then, does not solve the translation issue. Instead, it documents this tension, showing how different philosophical traditions (German, French, English) have historically chosen different terms to render logos and how those choices shaped subsequent philosophical development. (Ibid., pp. 605-618.)

Cassin's work ultimately makes two powerful claims. The first claim is that philosophy is fundamentally linguistic: philosophical thought is not a universal, pure structure floating above language, but is always historically and linguistically embedded. The second claim is that Translation is a Philosophical Act. Yet, translation is never a neutral, mechanical operation. It is a creative, complex, and profoundly philosophical act of choosing, defining, and arguing over conceptual equivalence across different linguistic "homes" of thought. Cassin's Dictionary, thus, serves as a map of the conceptual fault lines of European philosophy, making untranslatability the very motor of philosophical creation.

6.2.8 Emily Apter's Contribution

Apter explicitly defines her project as drawing on the concept of the "Untranslatable" (often capitalized to denote its philosophical status). This term marks a pivotal moment of linguistic resistance and a point of ongoing dialogue and interpretation. She defines the "Untranslatable" as a philosophical term and political tool. (Apter, Emily S., 2013)

Connecting Untranslatability to cultural context and resistance (against fluent "World Literature"), Apter argues that the "Untranslatable" interrupts the seamless circulation of texts in a globalized "World Literature" system, forcing an acknowledgement of cultural difference and historical context. (Ibid., p. 3.)

In Against World Literature, Emily Apter critiques the academic and publishing tendency to create a homogeneous, easily digestible global literary canon that often prioritizes political expediency and fluent reading over the complex and challenging realities of linguistic diversity and cultural specificity. She regards the Untranslatable as a "World-System," positioning it as a dynamic, unstable concept that highlights the richness of linguistic diversity rather than serving as a marker of lack or deficiency. (Ibid., pp. 31-44.)

Apter's concept isn't about words that cannot be translated. Instead, it concerns terms that should resist definitive closure in translation. She uses the term "Untranslatable" to describe a sign of difference (e.g., "fado", "saudade", "Weltliteratur") that, when translated, loses an essential layer of its historical, cultural, or philosophical baggage. It also refers to a call for hypertranslation rather than a smooth, fluent translation that domesticates the foreign text, as the untranslatable demands a translation that is "stuttering" or marked by the intransigence and difference of the original. Alternatively, it signifies a political intervention by emphasizing what is lost in translation.

6.3 The Behaviourist Approach: Reproduction Effect

Eugene Nida, whose primary focus was on functional and dynamic equivalence, concentrated on practical, faith-based communication. He did not engage in debates about translatability and untranslatability because he believed that meaning is generally translatable and aimed to ensure that translation functions effectively in the target language. He viewed the translator's role as producing the same effect, especially for religious texts like the Bible. He considered translation a solvable problem rather than a philosophical dilemma.

Nida was a pragmatist and applied linguist. He believed that all messages could be translated if the receptor's culture was taken into consideration and the message was adjusted accordingly. He assumed that all meaning is translatable with adaptation. His aim was effective communication, not philosophical reflection on linguistic limits. The more natural and receptor-based the translation, the more translatability problems are addressed.

6.4 The Functionalist Approach

Some translation-studies theorists have made significant contributions to translation theory, particularly in functionalism, equivalence, and translation strategies; however, they have not centrally focused on translatability as a philosophical issue. Scholars such as Eugene Nida, Juliane House, Katharina Reiss, Christiane Nord, Gideon Toury, Mona Baker, and Hans Vermeer did not primarily concentrate on translatability or untranslatability, as their work is grounded in practical, functional, or empirical frameworks of translation rather than in philosophical or metaphysical concerns. They did not emphasise the question of translatability or untranslatability, owing to their research aims, intellectual backgrounds, and theoretical interests.

6.4.1 Katharina Reiss

Katharina Reiss, whose primary concerns were text typology and a functionalist approach, focused on quality assessment rather than metaphysics. She emphasized matching methods to text types. She adopted a systematic and functional perspective. For her, different text types require different strategies, approaches and techniques, but translation remains a feasible option. She did not doubt the ability to translate. Instead, she concentrated on how best to do it depending on the text type. Reiss aimed to translate various kinds of texts effectively. Her systematic approach assumed that translation is possible and that suitable methods could be applied accordingly. She was not concerned with philosophical boundaries. Moreover, it is the text type that determines the translation method and resolves issues of untranslatability.

6.4.2 Juliane House

Juliane House, whose primary focus was on translation quality assessment and functional equivalence, did not participate in the debate because, like Nida, she believed that translation is always possible. She focused on assessing how well translation functions compared to the source and how accurately it matches the source text's function and meaning. She considers translation to be measurable, not philosophically limited. She accepted translatability as a given, viewing translation as a matter of degree and precision rather than a challenge. She approached translation from a linguistic and pragmatic perspective, rather than a philosophical one.

6.4.3 Hans Vermeer

Hans Vermeer, whose primary concern was functionalist Skopos theory and purpose-driven translation, viewed translation as an action guided by purpose, rather than limits. He explicitly argued that translatability is not the point. What truly matters is whether the translation fulfils its intended function. His approach accepts cultural differences but sees them as challenges rather than barriers. Vermeer emphasised function over form. His approach is highly functionalist. If a translation fulfils its intended purpose in the target culture, it is valid (regardless of whether exact equivalence is possible). He dismissed metaphysical questions about language's limits, believing that translation strategy should be based on function rather than linguistic form.

6.4.4 Christiane Nord

Christiane Nord's framework assumes that translation is possible as long as the goal or purpose (skopos) is clearly defined. For her, translation is a functional and purpose-driven process. The translator's role is to adapt the text to a new context, regardless of whether perfect equivalence can be achieved. Nord's approach is purpose-driven. She

emphasized that the form and function of a translation should suit the target audience. Since the goal determines the method, translatability becomes a technical rather than a theoretical issue. For Nord, translation is guided by purpose and communicative function. As a result, communication will reshape the untranslatables encountered in accordance with the defined function.

6.4.5 Gideon Toury

Gideon Toury, whose chief focus was on norms and empirical research, studied what translators actually do rather than pursuing philosophical boundaries. He intentionally avoided debates that were prescriptive or philosophical. Instead, he emphasized what translators undertake in real-world situations, not what they should do or whether translation is inherently possible. He regarded translation as a norm-driven activity rather than a metaphysical issue. Toury dismissed prescriptive and philosophical questions, focusing on empirical evidence of what translators genuinely perform. For him, translatability is irrelevant if people are already translating and producing functional equivalents. Furthermore, norms and translation patterns in context generally address untranslatables regardless of where or how they occur.

All in all, Eugene Nida, Juliane House, Katharina Reiss, Christiane Nord, Gideon Toury, and Hans Vermeer did not emphasise translatability and untranslatability because of the nature and aims of their theoretical frameworks. These theorists mainly belong to the pragmatic, functionalist, or empirical branches of translation studies, where the assumption is that translation is not only feasible but also practically manageable within real-world constraints.

7. Conclusion

This historical background demonstrates how pre-modern debates focused on the untranslatability of theology and literature, while modern theorists systematized it as a philosophical and political issue. The origins of the debate lie in humanity's oldest texts, confirming its lasting importance: what started as a question about ancient scripture has become a key method for analyzing how language shapes our reality, identity, and political frameworks.

All the thinkers listed earlier concentrated on translatability and/or untranslatability. Some did so explicitly and philosophically, others indirectly through literary and linguistic frameworks, and still others through cultural and humanistic reflection. Yet none of them ignored or overlooked the topic. They actively contributed to shaping the field's understanding of it (often in fundamental ways).

Wilhelm von Humboldt believes that untranslatability is partial, as each language influences its country's worldview.

Johann W. von Goethe believes in the concept of translatability through stages. He advocates for Weltliteratur. He views translation as progressing through three phases: literal, paraphrastic, and adaptive.

Friedrich Schleiermacher emphasizes Untranslatability, asserting that total equivalence is unachievable, and that genuine translation preserves the foreignness.

Walter Benjamin presents a metaphysical version of Untranslatability, defending the hypothesis that translation is never complete, and that an actual translation points to a "pure language" beyond both source and target.

Roman Jakobson argues that linguistic translatability is achievable, as most content can be translated except for poetry, which is an exception (due to poetic form and sound).

Lawrence Venuti defends the concept of Ethical Untranslatability, arguing that transparency domesticates and erases difference, while foreignizing resists complete translatability.

Antoine Berman introduces Untranslatability through Deformation, as translation distorts the foreign when Difference is not preserved.

Gayatri Spivak introduces the cultural and ideological concept of Untranslatability. Translation risks colonizing the Other; meaning is influenced by power and context.

Barbara Cassin introduces the philosophical concept of Untranslatability, in which the "Untranslatables" are terms rooted in cultural-linguistic thought systems that create tensions during translation.

Scholars in translation studies have long been divided between those who advocate untranslatability and those who emphasize the possibility of translation. Thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Antoine Berman, Lawrence Venuti, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Gayatri Spivak, Barbara Cassin, and Emily Apter argue that translation can never fully reproduce the original text, as each language carries unique cultural, philosophical, and linguistic nuances that resist complete transfer. Their contributions highlight the ethical, philosophical, and linguistic limits of translation, viewing it as an act marked by loss, transformation, or difference rather than equivalence.

In contrast, theorists such as Eugene Nida, Katharina Reiss, Juliane House, Hans Vermeer, Christiane Nord, and

Gideon Toury advocate the idea of translatability, emphasizing functional, communicative, and systemic approaches that make translation both feasible and meaningful. These scholars focus on how translators can effectively convey meaning, function, and purpose across languages through strategies such as dynamic equivalence, text typology, skopos theory, and descriptive translation studies. Therefore, while one school highlights the challenges and philosophical depth of translation, the other celebrates its practicality and communicative potential.

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